

**DCM Susan Falatko**  
**Introductory Remarks for**  
**Mauritius Family Planning Welfare Association**  
**Workshop on “Consolidating Couple Relationships to End Violence”**  
**Thursday, March 20, 9:30 a.m.**

Your Holiness and dignitaries of religious bodies, president and representatives of religious bodies, distinguished guests, Mrs. Charon, Executive Director and other members of the Mauritius Family Planning Welfare Association, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the U.S. Embassy, it is my great pleasure to be here with you today as we seek to “break the silence” on domestic violence. This is an issue that we at the U.S. Embassy feel very strongly about, because we have served all over the world – I have served all over the world - and I have seen it all over the world – including in my own country. I commend you for taking on this issue, for talking about it, and for bringing men to the discussion table. While men are victims as well, and we cannot discount that, the fact remains that a majority of victims are women.

These past few months, as we have watched in horror as one woman after another in Mauritius has met a horrible end at the hands of her partner, husband, or fiancé, one thing I can’t help but notice is that for most, if not all of them, this was not the first time they were victimized. Where were their support systems? Their families, their friends, their neighbors, their religious leaders? So often we look

the other way when we should be speaking up. I think it's fair to say that it is the silence that kills.

Sadly, this tragedy is not a new one. It has thrived for centuries, hidden by shame.

All too often, the physical – and emotional - abuse of domestic violence is considered a private matter and not seen by friends, family, neighbors, or even the authorities as a crime. Recent surveys in Mauritius show that nearly one in four women have experienced severely abusive behavior of a physical, sexual or emotional nature from an intimate partner at some time in their lives. They are here in this room right now. Yet often people don't know what to think or do when faced with a women suffering from domestic violence. Most victims fail to report abuse because of the embarrassment they feel, or their fear of having no place to go and no one to turn to for help.

Going forward we must all of us - in government, civil society, the media and private sectors - intensify our efforts to change this deadly culture of silence.

We must improve the public knowledge and implementation of existing laws and assistance programs so that victims can come forward, confident that there are institutions in place that will treat their domestic abuse cases professionally,

sensitively, and seriously. It has to become easier for victims to report crimes, it has to be clear where victims can go for long-term refuge, and perpetrators of violence have to know that they will be held accountable for their crimes.

This workshop today looks at the issue from a different angle – consolidating couple relationships. This is an avenue well worth exploring. Domestic violence is often the result of a power imbalance within a relationship, where one partner – male or female - seeks to control another. When it is the man who seeks control, quite often it is in the belief that this is his right, because that is what he has been brought up to believe. It ignores the basic fact that everyone in a relationship has the right to live a life free from abuse.

How can relationships be consolidated in such a way that removes the power imbalance, this belief that one person has dominion over another? Some of these values are deeply ingrained in culture. I think it is good that we have religious leaders here today to contribute to the discussion, because I think you hold one of the keys. We don't have to agree on whether there exists "a proper role" for both men and women, and no one can deny that men and women are fundamentally different, but I think we can agree that every life should be valued, and protected. I hope we can all agree that husbands and wives should respect each other – that it is

not a one-way street. This a key value that leaders – religious or other - can transmit to their communities. I think just this simple value – mutual respect – will go a long way towards ending the attitudes that lead people to become abusers and that convince them that their actions are perfectly correct.

Of course, this is not enough. And so I want to return to where I started, to call on everyone here, particularly our respected religious leaders, to end the culture of silence. We at the Embassy came up with a slogan that we plan to use, moving forward in the campaign against domestic violence, “Ki to rol pu aret violans?” What is your role? Each of us has one. Mine, and I hope yours, is to speak out. Speak out against domestic violence, I urge you; let your followers know that it is NOT ok to abuse an intimate partner, that it is NOT ok to deny them the same basic rights that everyone is entitled to, and that it is NOT ok to sit in silence and watch as another victim – possibly someone you know - becomes yet another ugly statistic.

I wish you much success today in your workshop, and again, I commend you all for breaking the silence by your participation, and I’m looking forward to this morning’s discussion. I look forward to meeting many of you and to working with you in the future to combat domestic violence.